

Statement from NGOs at the Coexistence conference, Vienna April 2006

7-4-06

This statement is made on behalf of a number of environmental, beekeeper, conventional and organic farming organisations present today in response to the discussions we have heard over the past two days.

We would first like to thank the organisers for making this conference happen and in particular we would like to thank the Austrian government, for not only being great hosts, but also for taking a strong political lead on the issue of GMOs.

However, we have great concerns that the key issues that we have raised during this conference have not been fully addressed, in particular the Commission's position on contamination and its assumptions on how these problems can be resolved. Some of these flawed assumptions, which should be widely discussed in an open process, seem to have been conveniently ignored by the careful selection of key speakers.

GM Free Agriculture

Firstly we have heard that GMOs are here in Europe and that we need to accept that. This is not true. GM crops are grown only on a small area in Europe whereas an increasing number of regions have made it clear that they want to stay GM free. There are currently 172 regions in Europe that have made GM free declarations who, during this conference called for a moratorium on cultivation until strict and clear rules on coexistence are put in place at a European level, allowing them to set up GM free areas.

The majority of Europeans expect their food to remain GMO free. This was seen clearly yesterday when thousands of people took to the streets outside this conference demanding a guarantee to their right for GMO free food and the right for farmers to GMO free agriculture.

No Contamination

We have also heard that zero contamination is not possible and we will have to live in the future with a standard contamination of 0.9%. This is totally unacceptable. There is no right to contaminate non-GMO products. But instead member states do have the right to avoid genetic contamination. The majority of foods in Europe are GM free, you will hardly find any labelled products in the supermarkets and in the vast majority of food products there are no detectable levels of GMOs.

European law allows for the adventitious or technically unavoidable presence up to 0.9% before a food or feed product needs to be labelled. The Commission's apparent policy, reflected in their Recommendations and Communications, is to misuse this labelling threshold as a cultivation threshold and to work towards contamination in the fields. This will undermine the viability to develop sustainable farming, takes away consumer choice and also threatens our environment. Independent lawyers have concluded that this approach is fundamentally flawed and wrong in law. We do not believe that this issue has at all been addressed in this conference.

Clean Seeds

The food chain begins at the seed. Maintaining purity of seeds is key to giving consumers and farmers real choice and the prerequisite of traceability and risk management in the environment. There is a broad consensus that GMO contamination of seeds must be labelled at the practical detection level on 0.1%. Industry demands for higher thresholds are unacceptable. A half of all seed production in Europe is done by farmers and no evaluation of the impact on them has been done.

As the Commissioner for the Environment stressed on the first day of the conference, coexistence is not just an economic issue but also about environmental risk management.

Liability

The Agriculture Commissioner also talked about the unsolved problems of liability. This is a key issue that again has not been addressed in this conference. Instead, the Commission's policy is to wait until 2008 at the earliest. The Commission has not given any indication that a proper framework at EU level will be presented.

We have seen during the Conference that the GMO industry is trying in an aggressive way to dump the costs of GM contamination on society at large and they refuse to take responsibility for the consequences of their risky technology. Cost for preventing contamination must fall on GM operators and licence holders in accordance with the polluter pays principle.

Is Coexistence possible?

The threat of contamination is real and as we see from the evidence in Spain it is happening now. This conference, although welcome, should not be seen as an in depth consultation as presented by the Commission or of having reached agreement or consensus on the key issues. We want to see a Europe wide debate which is open to all citizens and farmers and addresses the key issues raised above. We were told that this conference is not about yes to GMOs or no to GMOs, but HOW. There also needs to be the question of whether coexistence is possible at all. Evidence suggests that it isn't.

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